CHOOSE LIFE: GIVE THANKS
Psalm 118
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An ancient pious legend tells about two angels who were sent out from heaven to collect prayers from the people on earth, prayers of petition, askings, and prayers of thanksgivings praises. The angel in charge of receiving thanksgivings was dispatched with a very large basket, while the angel in charge of petitions was supplied with a much smaller basket to gather all the prayers asking God for something or other. Obviously God thought the people on earth had much more to be thankful for than they had needs which remained to be filled. But when they returned to heaven, both angels were in trouble. The petitions, the askings, overflowed the one angel's basket and filled a huge sack as well. People were asking for an awful lot of things. But the angel of thankful prayers had only three contributions barely visible at the bottom of his deep basket.

That is not the way we are meant to be. Dietrich Bonhoeffer points that out very sharply in his little volume Psalms: the Prayer Book of the Bible, published shortly before his execution by the Nazis. His thesis is that we need to learn to pray rightly if we are to live rightly. He writes that the Book of the Psalms is the best teacher we have, a teacher to which even Jesus constantly referred and returned in his own prayers.

I propose that we take Bonhoeffer up on that right now, that we look together at one particular psalm for what it can teach us. I have Psalm 118 in mind - Responsive Reading 41 Let us read this scripture lesson, listening for God's word to us, and then please keep it open before you for further reference.

(Please refer to Psalm 118).

The first four verses set the tone. They are verses of thanksgiving to God for his continuing love. For emphasis, that thanksgiving is repeated four times: "his mercy endureth forever."

Then we learn that this thanksgiving comes out of hard reality. Verses 5, 6 and 7 tell of distress and fear and conflict. It is not a rose-colored glasses view of life that prompts this song of thanksgiving.

A little further on, the writer refers to his close encounter with death: "The Lord hath chastened me sore (punished me severely): but he hath not given me over unto death" - - apparently a close call. That experience leads him to offer praise again.

Then he sums up with this reflection on all that has happened: "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." So, in the midst of trial and adversity, immersed in anxiety, barely escaping death, the psalmist affirms God's goodness and love and he concludes: "O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good; for his mercy endureth forever."

The New Testament writers quoted this psalm more frequently than almost any other portion of the Old Testament. Obviously, it spoke powerfully to the earliest Christians, hounded and persecuted for their faith, constantly under the threat of death. Thankfulness was the basis of their strength and perseverance.

The Apostle Paul had exactly this power of thankfulness in mind when he wrote the Thessalonians words read in today's first scripture passage: "Rejoice always, pray constantly give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

The theme that really living is dependent on being thankful is a constant emphasis throughout the history of our faith. In eighteenth century England, clergyman William Law wrote, "If any would tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness and all perfection, he must tell you to make a rule to yourself to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you, if you thank God and praise him for it, you turn it into a blessing."

Don't we object? Isn't that too simple, too naive? Can any rational person, realistically aware of tragedies and frustrations, can anyone who really knows of the accidents and ills of life, really give thanks "whatever happens"? How can thanksgiving in all circumstances, especially in painful situations, lead to happiness? We are much more familiar with the alternative, aren't we? When misery or misfortune engulfs a person, it is much more common to hear complaining and self-pity or, at best, there is the stiff upper lip to endure a hostile world.

Thankfulness is a feeling we seem to have too little of, as the two angels discovered. Complaining and feeling sorry for ourselves come pretty easy. The wonderful things we wish we had are so much more on our minds than all the good things of life we have already been given. Our eyes just don't see all God's blessings as well as they should. Perhaps in our prayers, the one thing we should really be asking for is a better ability to see the beauty and blessings of our life. Rather than focusing on the petty qualities of people, we need better vision to see the good, the worth, in everyone around us. Rather than griping about the pains and problems of life, we need better eyes to see God's goodness even in the events which are hardest for us to bear.

You see, to be thankful is not merely an option in life. Thankfulness is really life itself. The complaining, moaning, dissatisfied person is not really living. He is being consumed by his negativity. Life brings us all occasions of sorrow, but the person who wallows in self-pity, who clutches his disappointments to his breast and makes a career of nursing his sadness - that person is not fully alive. Constant gloom and pessimism cancel out all feelings of gratitude and strangle the life out of a person. But if, like the psalmist, we really try to see things we can be thankful for and if we look for ways to express our thankfulness, we can radically improve the whole quality of our living.

A few years ago two dramatic events happened to me on successive days, a combination that so strongly proved the importance of thankfulness for life that I will never forget them

The first event was a theater presentation of Medea, the ancient Greek dramatic tragedy. In the play I witnessed the unfolding of one horrible event after another as the heroine completely drowned in self-pity and bitterness. Medea had been treated very badly, very unjustly, and in her rage she willfully destroyed everything she loved. No question but that she had every cause to be angry. But when she chose to concentrate her whole being on that righteous anger instead of focusing her life on her blessings of two beautiful sons and all her loyal friends, then she violently destroyed her boys and ended her own life. The audience left that Greek play completely wrung out emotionally. It took me several hours to dispel the oppressive black gloom and regain a feeling of hope and joy, that life was really good.

The next day was the memorial service for the teenage son of a neighboring minister. The minister and I had been good friends for fifteen years. His son had been killed in an auto accident - a senseless thing in which the other driver was completely at fault. My emotions were deeply engaged before I even stepped into the church that afternoon. The worship was led by the boy's father. It focused on thankfulness and gratitude without denying the tragedy. We sang hymns of victory and praise. The minister-father spoke movingly of four important things he had learned from his son. Instead of dwelling on bitterness that his son had been killed at age 16, he found a number of ways to express deep

gratitude for the years he had known his son. The memorial service was truly a worship of praise and thanksgiving.

We in the congregation began that service united by our shock and grief. As we worshipped and praised, the congregation's mood shifted. We became able to join in thanksgiving for the person the son had been, for the quality of living he showed. You could feel new vitality rise in the congregation, new life given birth by our thankfulness. This was the real-life tragedy, of course, not the Greek play. But the congregation left the memorial service with hope and life because of the thankfulness expressed - a strong contras to the black hopeless feeling which followed Medea.

I am not saying that being thankful will erase all of life's pains and tragedies. Nor am I saying sorrow and disappointment are not real and valid reactions to many of life's happenings. They certainly are. But I am saying that the person who really lives is the person who looks for reasons to be thankful rather than dwelling on reasons for gloom.

I have seen people in deep tragedy work their way toward acceptance. Completely miserable, in despair at first, perhaps for many months, some people do come to accept God's will for them even in deep loss and pain. I have seen their lives take on the air of thankfulness, seen them find life meaningful again - even more meaningful than ever before.

All people are given the strength and courage to face up to whatever strikes at them and to be saved through thankfulness. I say that with complete conviction: All people. In all circumstances. Quite often, a person needs help from other people to be able to work his or her way towards thankfulness. That is not weakness. To admit you have a need and then seek out someone to help is not easy. But everyone can do it. I have been taught by experience time and time again that, with help, people in the midst of tragedy can surmount their pain.

True, some do not. It is hard. A person has to defeat self-pity. And many would rather hold tight to their bitterness, as if bitterness were protection from life. But others do become able to give thanks in all circumstances, as Paul directs. And these find themselves on the shortest, surest road to happiness.

Reasons for thankfulness abound. We are surrounded with blessings that cry out for us to see them clearly. Tragedies and sorrows? Yes, they are very real. But the person whose eyes are open to God's goodness finds gratitude enriching his whole life. In this very real world, where we all have troubles and pains, the thankful person, the one who rejoices, is the one who really lives.

Most gracious and loving God, help us to learn from the Psalmist to approach each day with gratitude for all you provide. May we grow in the spirit of thankfulness that allows us to receive fully the abundant life you offer us in Jesus Christ.

Amen.